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**Preparing for President Biden**

US President-elect Joe Biden addressing supporters. File  photo

“Pakistan is fifty times more important to the United States, than Afghanistan”, Joe Biden to former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, January 2009.

How can Pakistan best prepare for a Biden administration taking power in Washington DC in January 2021? By trying to understand not only Joe Biden, but also the unique configuration of trends, events and people that have converged to manufacture what will be the world’s most important centrist government when Biden takes the oath of office.

Biden is, by far, the most experienced political and policy figure ever to have won election to the office of the president of the United States. In an era that is supposed to throw up only outsiders that challenge the orthodoxy, Biden is the very definition of a textbook establishment figure. He has won the US general election principally and primarily because he is neither Donald Trump nor Bernie Sanders.

Biden is a dyed-in-the-wool American Democrat, with a strong record on issues like race. But Biden’s victory is not a repudiation of Republican values or politics, and it is not an endorsement of modern-day progressive slogans or causes. The impressive performance of Republicans running for Congress and the Senate, combined with the more than 70 million strong show of strength that the Trump campaign has managed in its losing effort all signify the mandate of the Biden campaign: not-Trump.

Biden’s folksy charm and his long track record of endearing (and occasionally outrageous) public gaffes are critical elements of the not-Trump persona that Americans have chosen. Trump spent four years keeping the world guessing, as he disrupted and dismantled many long-standing US establishment habits. Perhaps among the most important was the refusal of US military leaders to engage the Taliban in a serious conversation about an end to the US campaign in Afghanistan.

The Trump era was among the darkest ever for traditional American diplomacy, with many State Department employees resigning or taking long leave, and many embassies left to dangle in the wind as all key diplomatic functions were taken over directly by the extended foreign policy team at the White House – led by Jared Kushner. Unilateralism, protectionism, bilateral deal-making and bullying helped define the Trump era’s foreign policy vibe. The not-Trump era that Joe Biden will ring in will be decidedly different in both style and in substance.

Biden’s key foreign policy and national security people all come from one of two places: they are either veterans of his time in the Senate, including his over a decade-long stint as the ranking member or chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, or they are Obama White House veterans. This represents, by far, the most experienced crop of foreign policy people that has taken office since at least George H W Bush in 1989. The principal qualities that this kind of experience tends to lend to any policy environment are conservatism and continuity. The Biden administration will begin the not-Trump era by trying to restore ‘normalcy’ and institute stability and predictability to American diplomacy.

A Biden presidency will focus on five key areas, in terms of its foreign policy. First, Biden will seek to renew alliances and reinvigorate multilateralism, with the US at the head of the table. Second, Biden will robustly support ‘American’ values, which will mean a greater emphasis on democracy and human rights all around the world. Third, Biden will invest in conflict-minimizing counter-terrorism efforts – which will mean an end to ‘forever wars’, a greater reliance on surveillance and counter-intelligence, and a softening of approach on Iran. Fourth, Biden will seek to counter both Russia and China – but his approach will differ in intensity. He will not hesitate to take on Putin early and often, but he will seek to signal efforts to contain, rather than antagonize China. Finally, Biden will renew US leadership on climate change.

What does this mean for Pakistan? It means three things above all.

First, Joe Biden will enter the White House with the strong belief that he knows Pakistan better than any US president has ever had. He has spent countless hours deliberating on the question of Pakistan’s role in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s stability and security, Pakistan’s prosperity, the quality of Pakistani democracy, the corruption and inefficiency of governance in Pakistan, and the civil-military divide in the country.

The intimate portrait of Pakistan that Biden enjoys has been more than four decades in the making, with regular visits to Pakistan since the 1990s. For years, Biden has engaged (and prevailed) in debates with foreign policy heavyweights and US generals on issues related to Pakistan – including Mike Mullen, Douglas Lute, Richard Holbrooke, Robert Gates, Leon Panetta, Hillary Clinton, and David Petraeus. Biden’s core foreign policy team includes men and women that have spent more time on Pakistan and Afghanistan than they have on any other issue. This strong confidence and knowledge of Pakistan will mean that from day one, the Biden team will have a clear list of things that it wants from Pakistan. Pakistani policymakers need to prepare for a team that will hit the ground running (and fast).

Second, Biden’s primary lens for Pakistan will be a combination of three administration priorities: withdrawal from Afghanistan, containment of China and nuclear stability and security for Pakistan. The blueprint for withdrawal has already been written by Zalmay Khalilzad. Biden will seek to be heavily bipartisan in his approach to foreign policy, and though Khalilzad’s history with key Biden allies (such as John Kerry) has been rocky, it is possible that he will be retained to finish off the Doha process – both for continuity and for what it would help signal to moderate Republicans on the Hill and throughout the Beltway. Pakistan is the one geopolitical arena on which American centrists regularly seek common ground with China. Pakistan’s treatment of the China-US contest as a binary is likely to be defied by a broader strategic compact between the two giants to support Pakistan, as long as Pakistan plays ball on some key counter-terrorism and global stability metrics.

Finally, Biden has a long record of seeing an unstable Pakistan as a major source of global risk. A Biden administration, humbled by its experience during the Obama years, is unlikely to try to coerce Pakistan to do its bidding, but it will almost certainly look to incentivize Pakistani behaviour through a combination of aid and trade. The one condition for deeper engagement with the United States that Pakistan will face however, will be the wider agenda for democracy and human rights that the Biden camp has already signalled as a key priority.

Third, Pakistan must understand both the irreversibility of US-India relations, and the limits of these relations. India is already a key strategic partner for the US. The last significant foreign policy act of the Trump administration is likely to have been the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) between the US and India. BECA will substantially enhance India’s surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, further deepening its capacity to conduct intel and counter intel operations deep inside Pakistani territory and across Pakistani society. A President Biden may hear and understand Pakistan’s concerns, but he will do nothing to address them. What Biden will be receptive to, however, is India’s conversion into an illiberal republic, run by religious zealots that violate almost every premise of democracy and human rights imaginable.

Of course, Pakistan’s ability to point to India’s many failings on this front will be much stronger if Pakistan can address questions about its own missing people, about the unfulfilled human rights promises of Prime Minister Imran Khan, and the sense of fear that grips many journalists.

Pakistan will have a natural advantage in dealing with a Biden administration, given its strong commitment to multilateralism, and PM Khan’s demonstrated interest in climate change and anti-corruption. The challenge will be for Pakistan to mobilize its advantages, minimize its vulnerabilities, and engage the new administration with the energy and creativity that the opportunity of a fresh start with the US merits.

“America stands by a democratic Pakistan and will continue to support its growth and prosperity”, Joe Biden to former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, September 2014.

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